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Featured Highlight

SEC A Critical Partner in Formation of the Center Progressive Renewal



In a bold and courageous step to strengthen leadership development in the United Church of Christ, the Southeast Conference is proud to partner with Local Church Ministries (LCM) and Hope For Peace and Justice (H4PJ) to announce the creation of the Center of Progressive Renewal (CPR) based in Atlanta in the Southeast Conference office. The Center for Progressive Renewal is a non-profit organization whose primary mission is to train leaders to start and grow the 21st century Progressive Church.

The Southeast Conference is a valued partner in the formation of the Center for Progressive Renewal, giving one of our staff, Rev. Cameron Trimble, to serve as the President and Co-Director of CPR. In recent years, the Southeast Conference has found that having partners in the national setting of the United Church of Christ, in its seminaries, in churches, and among other conferences, as well as ecumenical partners who share our passion for a Gospel can strengthen our vital witness in the South. "The Center's formation provides us an opportunity to gather these partners to build churches and to identify and equip leaders for a future of great hope," says Tim Downs, Conference Minister of the Southeast Conference.

The Center for Progressive Renewal will work with the staff of the Southeast Conference and other conferences to plant new UCC churches as well as revitalizing our existing churches. By focusing on leadership development, CPR will strive to raise the standards of leadership in our lay leaders and clergy through practical training in church growth and development. "This center can be a bridge between where we are and where we're going as a denomination," said LCM's executive minister, the Rev. Steve Sterner. "Affiliated with the UCC but open to partnerships with other progressive churches, the center can give us the structural flexibility we need to adapt to opportunities for church growth in a rapidly changing culture."

The new Center will serve existing and future UCC congregations but will be organized as an independent non-profit agency. "This is a new model for sustainable church growth and church revival in a reality of diminishing financial resources," says the Rev. David Schoen, leader of LCM's Congregational Vitality and Discipleship Ministry Team. "It gives us the means to build partnerships with other denominations and to seek financing from foundations that normally would not fund a denominational office."

"The Center aims to equip congregations and clergy with the best practices for reversing membership decline," Trimble told the partners. "Every week we close three churches in the UCC, and every week we plant 0.7 new churches—and of the latter I can't tell you how many will survive. It's easy to do the math. I know you and I love this church too much to allow membership decline become an irreversible trend. We'll be drawing on the skills of the best ecumenical practitioners in church development and renewal who can serve as a pool of consultants and coaches for the denomination," Trimble told the board. "Our ambition is to become the Alban Institute for new church development. At present there is no ecumenical center serving the development of new congregations in progressive denominations. This is a vacuum we aim to fill."

Replacing the model of a centralized denominational agency planting new congregations, the Center "will return to a proven strategy: that healthy congregations give birth to new congregations," Trimble said. "When we conducted autopsies of 50 failed new church starts, we discovered that in each



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case they lacked an external support system. But the success rate increases when denominations aggressively practice 'church multiplication' with existing congregations as the starting point.

"We need to be building church-birthing partnerships with the UCC's best asset: its local congregations," Trimble said. The Center will focus on these goals:

- * Increase the number of new churches planted in critical regions, especially regions of the country with the highest population growth rates.
- * Increase the number of trained, competent new church developers and revitalizing pastors in the UCC.
- * Build a seminary-based training program that prepares current and future clergy to plant new congregations or renew existing churches.
- * Strengthen the commitment of conference staff to support new church development.
- * Develop models for vocational placement, internships, partnerships and other creative approaches to support new church leaders and congregations that are planning new churches.

"The Progressive Renewal Team is committed to first-rate execution and outcomes," said Trimble. "We deeply value measurable results and commit to providing the United Church of Christ with the best possible services available to mainline denominations. We understand that this is a significant decision and investment on the part of all of our partners. With that in mind, we will deliver unquestionable quality and results, and we are willing to be held accountable for reaching our mutual goals."

The Center's website at www.progressiverenewal.org defines "progressive Christianity" as "a faith that believes God's family includes all people... a faith for which millions of Americans hunger."

According to the website, progressive Christians accept that "God's people are responsible for caring for the environment, the poor, sick and vulnerable; that education, healthcare and civil liberties are vital to abundant life and therefore the desire of God for all people; and that truth is found more often in honest grappling with the questions than in absolute hierarchical pronouncement of the answers."

The Rev. R. Joaquin Willis, the LCM board's vice-chair and pastor of the Church of the Open Door in Miami, said he believes the new Center will "focus on what it takes to get new congregations off the ground."

"I was a new church pastor 20 years ago, and I know the pressures a church planter faces," Willis said. "I hope this Center will help the UCC learn and apply the best ecumenical practices for church development."

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